

Lewis Latimer

by Stephen Currie

Though electric light was slow to catch on among the public, it was evident to scientists and inventors across America that a new age was dawning. Electricity, they realized, was the wave of the future.

Lewis Latimer

One of the first Americans to recognize the potential of electricity was a black man
5 named Lewis Latimer. Born in Massachusetts in 1848, Latimer served in the U.S. Navy during the Civil War. When the war was over, Latimer returned to Massachusetts and got a job with a law firm that specialized in patents and inventions. At first he worked as an office boy, delivering messages and doing other simple tasks that involved little responsibility. Assignments like these made some sense, given his youth and relative
10 inexperience. It is also likely, however, that Latimer's race kept him from being considered for positions that carried more authority—and a larger paycheck.

Latimer did not wish to remain an office assistant for long, though. He soon became intrigued by the work of the company's draftsmen. To apply for a patent, inventors had to provide careful pictures that showed every detail of their inventions. Because most
15 inventors did not have the skill to execute these pictures on their own, patent lawyers typically had expert draftsmen on staff to create the diagrams. Latimer resolved to learn everything he could about drafting. He studied drawing techniques at home and practiced them whenever he could. Before long, his bosses recognized his talent and promoted him to the post of draftsman. By 1875 he was the head draftsman for the firm.
20 As a later newspaper report put it, Latimer had been "thrust upward by his singular talent and drive."

Latimer's drawing work brought him into contact with many inventors. The most famous of these was Alexander Graham Bell, best known as the inventor of the telephone. Latimer made several drawings which helped Bell claim the patents he sought. To draw
25 these designs as accurately as possible, it was necessary for Latimer to learn as much as he could about Bell's work. In the process Latimer became interested in the principles of electricity, principles which underlay much of what Bell was doing. As Latimer read more and more about electric power, he became convinced that this form of energy could help Americans in new and important ways.

Patents

30 In the late 1870s Latimer began looking for a job that would allow him time to pursue
his new interests in technology. He was eventually offered a position at a company called
the United States Electric Lighting Corporation. The head of the company, Hiram Maxim,
was already well known among scientists for his work with electric power. Though
35 Thomas Edison had already patented the first truly effective electric light bulb, Maxim
believed he could improve on Edison's design. In particular, Maxim thought he could
increase the life span of the bulb. Toward that end, he hired the most intelligent and hard-
working people he could find—including Latimer.

Latimer spent his first few months in Maxim's employ trying to improve the bulb's
filament—the wirelike assembly inside the bulb that gives off the actual light. In 1881, just
40 a year after joining Maxim's firm, Latimer and a colleague patented a new and more
efficient way of making filaments, using what their application called “a continuous strip
of carbon secured to metallic wires.” The new procedure resulted in better, cheaper light
bulbs even than Edison had been able to produce. In the next months Latimer went on to
patent several more inventions, each of which made light bulbs longer lasting and easier to
45 manufacture—and each of which brought more money to the corporation. Maxim's
confidence in Latimer had paid off.

Latimer did not spend all his time inventing. His work had made him an authority on
electric lighting, and Maxim consequently gave him more and more responsibility. Maxim
sent him to Philadelphia and other U.S. cities to oversee factory operations. Later, Latimer
50 traveled to England to set up a new factory and to Montreal, Canada, to guide workers in
installing electric lights in train stations. In Montreal he even learned some French to
communicate with employees who spoke little or no English. “This was my mighty lesson,”
he wrote years later. “My day was spent climbing telegraph poles and locating arc lamps
on them with the assistance of my laborers who seemed much impressed with my effort to
55 speak their native language.”